

Mission Mush and Lakota Cuisine...

Several years ago, I went to a fine restaurant, where a dinner cost as much as our entire month of food back home when I was growing up on the Pine Ridge reservation. On the elegant menu was something called Polenta. Our host was raving about this new side dish, so I ordered it.

“Hey, this is mush,” I exclaimed when I tasted it, “the same stuff we had every day at the mission school I went to on the reservation.” The waiter haughtily corrected me, telling me in detail about the careful preparation of the dish.

But he couldn't fool me. Twelve years in the mission school made me a connoisseur of cornmeal mush. For the entire school year we had lumpy mush or lumpier oatmeal for breakfast every day, except on Sunday when we got store-bought cornflakes. The kids at the BIA boarding school in Pine Ridge were well fed compared to us, and they would rub it in by calling us mush heads or mush eaters. We had names for them as well, but using them would warrant a knot on the head from our Jesuit prefects, and propriety forbids me from repeating them here.

Gruel would seem very appetizing in comparison – Oliver Twist would never have gone back for another serving of mission mush. But now, served as Polenta, it is proper etiquette to rave along with the host about how wonderful it is. Actually it is quite good, but mush nevertheless.

The good Franciscan nuns prepared our meals at the mission, and they were awful cooks. Saint Francis of Assisi, their patron saint, was much too kind to sanction feeding that kind of stuff to animals, which he loved. But he never said anything about humans, especially little brown heathens. We kids used to speculate that it was their cooking as much as their sacred vows that kept nuns from getting married.

We Lakotas were used to better food.

Even before frybread, Lakota food has always been good and nutritious, as shown by the statuesque warriors that dominated the Northern Plains over the years. Back then buffalo meat and venison were staples, but there were also fish, fowl, wild turnips and wild fruit. And although the Sioux were not agricultural people, corn, beans and various greens could be had following a Lakota “shopping spree” in a neighboring Pawnee or Omaha village. Dried meats, berries and tubers supplemented the hunted game and nourished the camp throughout the winter.

Although nowadays such dried foods might be considered unnecessary because of the availability of fresh meats and vegetables and canned foods, feasts back home still invariably include excellent soup made of dried meat (papa saka), dried corn (wastunkala), and dried wild turnips (timsila), followed by wozapi (berry pudding).

And the papa saka itself made for a delicious take-along munchy. Sliced paper thin by grandma's butcher knife, which was honed down to a thin, razor-sharp blade, the meat was dried in the sun, crisp as a taco shell. One wad of papa saka could be chewed an entire afternoon; and as you chewed, it would swell, releasing juices that were sealed in by nature. And grandma would also pound some up into a stringy pulp and mix it with dried berries, suet, and sugar for wasna (what

some non-Sioux called pemmican).

Today's hunters carry along "jerky" – strips of dried meat the thickness of french fries, and with the consistency of rubber. It helps them fantasize of pioneering days as they lumber along in their plush SUVs, with high-power rifles, laser scope sights that can focus on a mouse at a mile, amplified mating calls of any critter on the ship's log of Noah's ark, and clothes that can make you look like a tree and keep you toasty-warm on Mount Everest. But they don't have the real stuff when it comes to dried meat or wasna.

But as sumptuous and nutritious as it is, Lakota cuisine is not judged with fairness or kindness by some jealous kinsmen in Indian Country. Friends from other tribes have always teased us about a favorite traditional Lakota dish, which I won't name here except to reveal that it is four-legged and furry. They would build elaborate jokes about it, some of which would cause me to nearly burst from stifling laughter as I tried to appear dignified and above it all.

Recently on a visit back home we drove by a new place in Martin, South Dakota, with a big sign that read "Cajun Sioux BBQ." Their food was delicious, but I hate to think what that name might conjure up among old friends up in the Northwest tribes, who always had a field day ribbing me when I visited up in their country – especially Roger Jim of Yakama, and Sam Cagey of Lummi – wonderful men, both departed.

Back to mission school food: I love being a "survivor," as we boarding school alumni like to call ourselves. It gives us status like being old Jarhead veterans, who tend to talk less about combat than about boot camp experiences. Although we would put our mission schools up there with Parris Island for discipline, boot camp chow was at least edible – after all, who would the Drill Instructors torment if the recruit "maggots" didn't survive? Mission chow in my day would compare more with Stalag 17 swill, as shown in the movie of that same name.

Many older mission school and BIA school alumni are proud of their survival through the ordeal of boarding school life. There are out-Indianing sessions, usually over a beer or two and with much exaggeration, about who had it rougher back in the old days. When it comes to chow, though, the BIA schoolers always have to concede to the mission schoolers.

But I don't remember any mission schoolmates who didn't at least survive on our gaggy diet; but I do remember some that always maintained a sleek, plump frame, and they were always called "Chepa" – that's Lakota for "Chubby."

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